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**Title:** Teachers and their Habitus – a few Reflections on Educational Activity

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**Citation style:** Szczurek-Boruta Alina. (2017). Teachers and their Habitus – a few Reflections on Educational Activity. “The New Educational Review” (Vol. 48, iss. 2 (2017), s. 190-200), doi 10.15804/tner.2017.48.2.15



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## **Teachers and their Habitus – a few Reflections on Educational Activity**

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2017.48.2.15

### **Abstract**

In the study, the author refers to R. Kwaśnica's concept of two rationalities and to P. Bourdieu's constructivist structuralism. She assumes that the teacher's activity takes place within the limits of two (adaptive and emancipatory) rationalities in a specific "field", with a particular social, cultural and human capital, and with a developed habitus which determines educational practice. A research report is presented. This is done in the form of a record of the current state and socio-civilizational changes which have influenced teachers working in the southern part of the Polish-Czech borderland. Research results show both the continuity and change of the teacher's behavior and activity from the perspective of social time and social change. They allow for a closer insight into the structure of pedagogical activities and their effects. The strategy of longitudinal comparisons was applied. Diagnostic polling and the interview were used along with the (repeatable) panel method. The studies were conducted in time spans (1998, 2008, 2016) and they concerned the measurement of the teacher's perception of the "other" learner in class, self-reflection upon the role applied by the teacher, and the teacher's competences. The obtained research results allow for discovering the characteristics of the teacher's habitus, for understanding the mechanisms of its functioning and for the effective design of educational activity.

**Keywords:** *teacher, educational activity, rationality, habitus, borderland*

## **Theoretical assumptions and research methodology**

The perspective in which teachers' profile is outlined is Robert Kwaśnica's concept of two rationalities – adaptive and emancipatory (2007), treated as a means of improving the technical effectiveness of purposefully organized educational activities.

In the undertaken discussion, some references are made to Pierre Bourdieu's standpoint, called "constructivist structuralism" (1977, 1994), and to the key triad: field (the social context, structure in which individuals and groups act), capital (the resources valuable in a particular social context), habitus (the mental schemata and dispositions to act which are internalized by the individual).

It is assumed that the teacher's activity takes place within the borders of two rationalities (adaptive and emancipatory), in a specific "field" with a particular social, cultural, human capital and a developed habitus which determines pedagogical practice.

My focus is on the properties of the Polish-Czech borderland which shape teachers' reasoning and activity. Referring to two research orientations within borderland studies – "explaining the borderland" and "explaining through the borderland" (Golka, 2016:15), the latter is applied here. It is assumed that the features of the borderland determine the course of various processes or the shape of social phenomena, educational activities, and teachers' psychosocial and psycho-cultural behavior.

The research results constitute a record of the current state, of the socio-civilizational changes which have affected teachers working in the southern part of the Polish-Czech borderland. In the context of the borderland "effect", they show the continuity and change of teachers' behavior and activity from the perspective of social time and social change. These studies allow for a deeper insight into the structure of pedagogical activity and the effects of teachers' work.

The triangulation approach, popular in social sciences, was applied – the strategy of combining in one study various complementary research methods, techniques, empirical materials, and theoretical perspectives. The quantitative and qualitative strategies were used as complementary to each other.

The longitudinal studies were conducted in 1998, 2008 and 2016 with the use of the cohort method. Exploratory and comparative analyses were made of the teacher's perception of "the other" in the class and of the reflection on the assumed role.

Diagnostic polling and in-depth individual interviews were applied with the use of the (repeatable) panel method (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, 1996). The

studies are to capture the continuity and inner dynamics of the change, as well as certain mechanisms which determine this change. The basic sample comprised 869 teachers working in primary schools in the southern part of the Polish-Czech borderland in Poland. In 2016 the research subject also involved teachers' competences. The examined sample was representative. The required size of the sample was specified with the use of the sample size calculator. In all the three measurement periods, the research sample fulfilled the criteria of representativeness. For the selection of the field and groups of the examined teachers, the joint method of purposive sampling was used (research field and schools), then among these teachers a sample of teachers was randomly selected, in the qualitative studies – snowball sampling was used. In the examined group, women constituted 92.4%, men – 7.6%. Most respondents had higher education with pedagogical training. The teachers' age structure fell into the following groups: age 20–30 (10.7%), 31–40 (29.8%), over 40 (59.5%).

The obtained empirical data were processed with the use of the following statistical methods: testing the statistical significance of differences with the Chi-squared test ( $\chi^2$ ), Kendall's coefficient of concordance, factor analysis and descriptive statistics (Ferguson, Takane, 1989). The applied statistical analysis software was STATISTICA 12.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **The learner and the teacher's perception of learners**

The life in the borderland means constant contact with a different culture. For the teacher, this means shaping the competences which facilitate work in a group or class, where a different learner often becomes a problem.

The idea of accepting diversity and otherness as constitutive features of mankind, the idea of understanding the Others through getting acquainted with them, is embedded in anthropology. The essence of contact with the Other is abandoning all prejudice and looking deep inside. For the teacher, a particular "other" is a learner – learners constitute the teacher's world, they are its important elements and objects of teacher influence, requirements and the assessment of their effectiveness. Learners are also objects of special support.

It can be assumed that the properties of the borderland are decisive for the course of different social processes and phenomena and for people's psychosocial and psycho-cultural behavior. In the borderland conditions, the natural closeness and daily contact with a different culture make the examined teachers sensitive

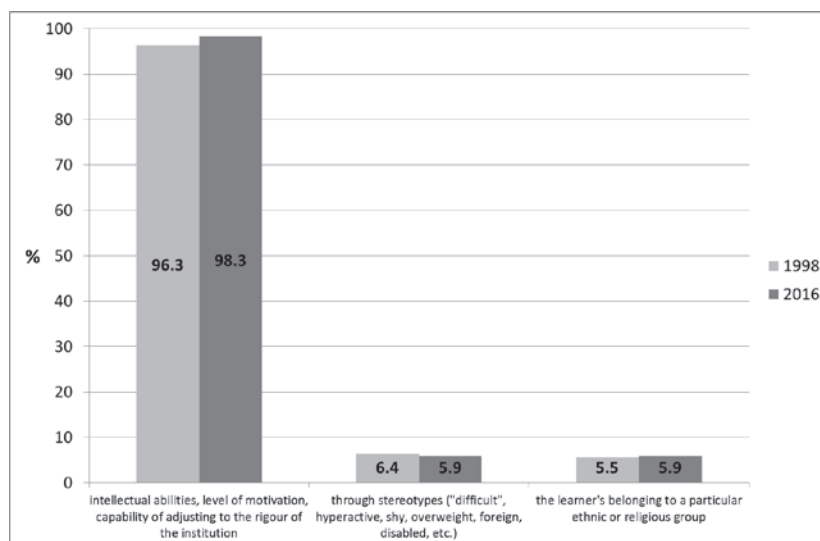
to all kinds of otherness. With equal acuteness, they notice both the potentialities and the threats resulting from many dimensions of the learner's otherness, they understand their significance for educational effectiveness.

The way in which the teacher perceives a learner determines this teacher's behavior and conduct towards the learner.

The prevailing qualities of learners taken into account by teachers in educational activities in 1998 were and still are their intellectual abilities, the level of motivation and the capability of adapting to the rigour of the institution. These qualities, referred to as socio-institutional values, have been pushing the consideration of the learner's other individual traits into the background. The learner's belonging to a particular ethnic or religious group seems to be ignored. The examined teachers are aware of labelling and negative stereotypes (a "difficult", hyperactive, shy, overweight, foreign, disabled, etc. learner) – yet, they tend not to be guided by them at work.

It seems surprising that, in the culturally and religiously diverse territory with rich multicultural traditions, teachers have not paid attention to the learner's ethnic, national or religious unlikeness. Teachers' habitus (practical sense) is manifested in applying the local perspective and various practices in certain contexts aimed

**Figure 1.** Perception of the "other" learner in class by teachers working in the southern part of the Polish-Czech borderland (1998 and 2016 studies)



Source: own research.

at making the ethnic or religious dimension invisible, unimportant, of secondary or tertiary significance. The memories of some conflicts at the national, religious or ideological background, of the difficult Polish-Czech relations in 1919–1938 associated with the war, the plebiscite, assimilation, and the annexation of Zaolzie, enhance the demarcation line which separates “us” from “them”, the unwillingness to entering the world of the others’ values and to applying political correctness to maintain and construct unity despite the existing divisions.

In educational practice, there is a wide variety of social situations. According to the theory of social perception, their elements are: the object of perception; the subject of a situation; the relationships between the object of perception and the person who perceives; other personal and non-personal elements of the situation; the relationships between the object of perception and the distinguished elements of the situation. All of them have an influence on perception (Lewicka, Trzebiński, 1985:107–108).

For the teacher, a learner becomes the object of perception, the subject of the situation. The teacher notices learners’ features of appearance, their behavior, views, social roles and their implemented tasks. From the standpoint of adaptive rationality, the learner’s otherness – in the respondents’ opinions – might hinder fulfilling the goals due to: *“language barriers”*; *“the limitations in a learner’s acquisition of knowledge”*; *“the necessity of an individual approach”*.

Teachers notice educational problems in classroom in relationships among the group and the whole school community because of learners’ otherness. The examined teachers state that: *“unlikeness raises controversy among other learners and their families”*; *“it is hard to break from stereotypes”*; *“the other triggers verbal and physical aggression”*.

The research results (both earlier and current) show that learners’ views, attitudes, problems as well as learners themselves are noticed to such an extent to which they are related to the teacher’s activity (either they cause problems or not). While searching for the ways of handling school problems, teachers often copy the model of being an efficient clerk and they limit their role to the institutional framework.

It is not surprising that the teacher focuses on the personality values which are associated with the normative tasks of an institution. What matters at school is competition, learners’ achievements and progress are valued most of all, the filter through which learners are perceived obscures their traits and needs – ignoring them is harmful for fulfilling the goals and for the course of interaction.

Contemporary teachers keep distant from the stereotypical thinking about the “others”. They notice the others’ positive influence not only on their own

development, on improving their teaching workshop and on the organization of educational activities, but also on the group of learners (the development of social behaviour, empathy, better familiarization with the culture from which the other learner comes, fighting against stereotypes, building social bonds, shaping the attitude of tolerance, understanding, support, collaboration).

The research results indicate the presence of both (adaptive and emancipatory) rationalities in teachers' activity. It depends on the situation which one is superior to the other. The respondents rather aptly understand the natural position of each rationality in their work with the learner – a representative of a different culture.

### **Self-reflection upon the role applied by the teacher**

While specifying their functions and tasks, the respondents view them as related to the basic functions of school – didactic, educational and caring. The teacher is a person fulfilling various roles, having the competences of a guardian and a tutor, which determines right relationships with the learner. This model is associated with knowledge, abilities, skills and applying some attitudes. Most teachers describe themselves as a researcher (in action research), a teacher who actively helps learners to acquire knowledge (69.7%), a teacher who actively produces knowledge with learners, learns with them and improves his/her own work (67.2%). 49.6% of the respondents feel they are an artist, a creative teacher. A certain group of teachers (51.3%) identify themselves in the category of a reflective practitioner (according to Schön's terminology) and approach their own work reflectively. 45.4% feel they are a guide teacher. Similar results were obtained in the 2008 studies. Then the teachers, who were guided by personal experience and reflection, described themselves as an action researcher or/and a reflective practitioner. The examined teachers do not reduce their role of an educationalist to one dimension of activity but place it in the whole range of professional duties – a carrier and disseminator of knowledge and skills.

### **Teachers' competences**

Human experience is created in two spheres of meaning: in the area of practical-moral knowledge and in the area of technical knowledge. This distinction results in R. Kwaśnica's (1993) indication of two groups of competences: practical-moral (interpretative, moral, communication) and technical (postulative/normative, methodological, implementary).

In my research, an attempt was made to specify the main groups of teacher competences. To discover the structure of relations between the variables (competences), factor analysis was used. Two relatively independent factors were present

in the correlation matrix. It can be claimed that the first factor is more correlated with the variables than the second, which means that factor 1 explains 40% of the total variance and factor 2 explains 30% of the total variance.

The first factor has high loading in the case of the normative, moral, communication and interpretative indicators of competences. Apart from normative ones, these competences are treated by R. Kwaśnica as belonging to the group of practical-moral and personality competences. They are manifested in the effectiveness of teachers' language behavior in educational situations, in the ability to refer to the world of things, people and to themselves in an understanding way. The capability of in-depth moral reflection and of shaping ethical behavior towards learners, the ability to solve educational problems and manage unclear, ambiguous situations are of particular importance in the teacher's activity.

**Table 1.** Competences – factor loadings

Variable Basic areas of teachers' competences useful at work:	Factor loadings (normalized Varimax) Distinguished: Principal components (Marked loadings are >.580000)	
	Factor 1	Factor 2
Interpretative	0.757464	0.259833
Communication	0.768320	0.300313
Moral	0.788698	0.212344
Normative	0.800072	0.179930
Methodological	0.213715	0.896500
Implementary	0.246910	0.886603
Competences to manage one's own professional development	0.534216	0.583994
Explained variance	2.818253	2.165992
Share	0.402608	0.309427

Source: Own elaboration

The second factor has high loadings as regards the indicators of methodological and implementary competences (which R. Kwaśnica classifies as technical competences). What also appeared in this group were the competences to manage one's own development, which had not been taken into account by R. Kwaśnica. The range of the teachers' use of these competences is limited to didactic activities. Shaping and improving them is enhanced by lifelong education activities and improving the skills to act according to the rules which specify the optimal order of activities.



Teachers' activities might be viewed as a set of practices aimed at fulfilling some established goals. What seems important in this set is the awareness of chances and threats posed by the 'other' learner in class, the self-reflection upon one's own role, and the acquired skills which have a direct impact on the implementation of the values and goals promoted in pedagogical activities. The results of the conducted statistical analysis show the accordance of the respondents' views concerning the perception of a learner as the other and the teachers' competences useful at work. Kendall's correlation coefficient is very good, with the value of 0.85000 for the section 0.81–0.95 and indicates the convergent standpoints of the examined teachers (the result of Friedman's ANOVA test and Kendall's correlation coefficient, Chi2 ANOVA ( $N = 2$ ,  $df = 9$ ) = 15.30000  $p = 0.04302$ , correlation coefficient = 0.85000).

Convergence is also present in the respondents' views on the teacher's role and acquired competences. Both instrumental and communication activities are of key importance in teachers' work. The research results show that both factors, both groups – of practical-moral and technical competences, are interrelated. The teacher's activities are situated in the ideological horizon marked by adaptive rationality, they are rooted in the logic of the aim and means. At the same time, emancipatory rationality allows for specifying the conditions for the constitution of sense in educational situations in the social and cultural context. In their own independent way, teachers search for weak points in their knowledge, they constantly revise its established facts and go beyond their experience. The respondents' original and creative ideas, e.g., those concerning the handling of classroom conflicts, result in: their own system of assessing classroom behavior, the use of motivation boards, establishing classroom regulations, conducting class debates and drama games.

The examined teachers also apply the rules of adaptive rationality in the sphere of interaction. A meaningful example of this is their use of well-tested scenarios of establishing and conducting dialogue with a learner and the use of the method of concluding a contract as the measures which enhance technical effectiveness. Looking for the ways of managing difficulties and changes in their work, many teachers refer to well-known, well-tested, well-elaborated techniques, they use educational technologies. The model of knowledge around which the teacher's daily practice is built is treated as rational. School is still a place of transmitting the established meanings and unification, along with its ways of reasoning. This takes place due to the technologically understood methodical way of teaching. Teachers' activities are determined by social structures in which they function and the cultural context which has an enormous influence on them.

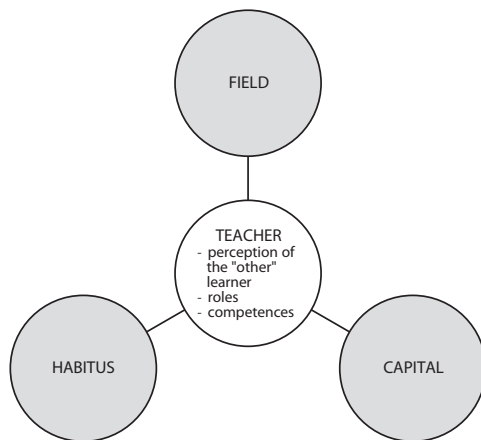
### The determinants of the teacher's educational activities

At work, teachers make use of their experiences collected in the process of socialization, education and academic training, and in their professional career. As regards the examined teachers, this “field” is indicated by the territorial and sociocultural borderland, multiculturalism, religious pluralism, transmission, consolidation and participation in cultural heritage, the primacy of regional education, the elaboration and implementation of small local undertakings. There are many such “fields” – professional, family, religious, economic, etc. A “field” determines the shaping of a habitus, which acquires some features typical of the requirements in a particular field or system of fields.

For teacher activity, borderland constitutes a specific, rationality marked “field” with particular social, cultural, human capital and a developed habitus used in their work. Culture, the memory of a place, the generated social structures, economic potentialities and cooperation in many areas of borderland life influence the teacher's life and work (Szczurek-Boruta, 2014).

The habitus of the Polish-Czech borderland is a product of history, it generates practices and classifications and enables its members to find orientation in the universe of ideas or values. History consists of teachers constructing their world and activity within it. The teacher's autonomy and self-awareness takes different forms in these conditions – from “practical awareness”, expressed in everyday rituals, to “discourse awareness”, expressed in dialogue or discussion. Teachers' practical sense is manifested in applying either the first or the second rationality of their own activity, depending on the context.

**Diagram 1.** The determinants of the teacher's educational activity



Source: own elaboration

Teachers are involved in social structures, the reproduction of structure and culture. This is associated with the aims which they establish and achieve as their partial duties.

Teachers' activity is influenced by both the "field/fields" in which they are anchored now and those in which they stayed in the past. The borderland is a place of contact and diffusion of traditions, customs and behaviors of various ethnic, national and religious groups. It is the territory where various fields function and each of them is guided by a different logic.

## **Conclusions**

Teachers function in a dynamic reality, they create and recreate practices. However, they do not do this entirely freely and intentionally, not even fully consciously, as having interiorized structures of social life in the form of dispositions (with special regard to the structures of educating), teachers are conditioned by these structures. Habitus is of key significance in teachers' activities. Discovering the properties of habitus by teachers as well as discovering the patterns of their own activity enables them to understand the mechanisms of acting and effective designing of pedagogical work. This necessitates equipping teachers with the methods of examining and analyzing their own and their learners' habitus, not only with achievement tests.

Educational activity is aimed at change. It can take place only as a result of harmonized co-acting of the macro and micro dimensions. It is not enough to change the teacher's thinking and conduct, it is necessary to change the conditions in which the teacher functions, the whole broader context, the "field". This should be done so that the teachers' transforming habitus could take place in real practice – yet, this will not happen without institutional support. The awareness of the "field" in which the "field" of the teacher's activity is situated, the knowledge concerning teachers and their practice, is indispensable even when the possibility of broadening the teacher's influence on the final shape of this "field" is limited.

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